

Representation of an Asian-Australian Gay in Hsu-Ming Teo's *Behind the Moon*

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Abstract: *This paper examines how a novel Behind the Moon (2005) provides literary representations of an Asian migrant's transforming sexual identities in Australia. Applying Morris's concept of a "politics of surveillance", it argues that approaches of strict control leads to an initial clash of cultures, and ultimately either to mutual transformation or a reinforcement of lack of agency/sexual difference. The analysis shows that the novel displays aspects of the cultural complexities of sexual identity formation regarding the character's identity as an Asian homosexual in Australia. As to transformation setting, the city is a spatial metaphor for cultural confinement and surveillance.*

Keywords: *Asian-Australian, homosexual, migrant, surveillance, transformation*

Abstrak: *Artikel ini membahas representasi tentang transformasi identitas seksual seorang pria migrant asal Asia di Australia dalam novel Behind the Moon (2005). Menerapkan konsep Morris tentang "politics of surveillance", artikel ini berpendapat bahwa pendekatan dengan kontrol yang ketat mengarah pada awal benturan budaya, dan akhirnya mengarah pada transformasi timbal balik atau penegasan kurangnya perbedaan seksual. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa novel tersebut menampilkan aspek kompleksitas budaya pembentukan identitas seksual mengenai identitas karakter sebagai seorang homoseksual Asia di Australia. Lokasi transformasi ini menunjukkan bahwa kota merupakan metafora spasial untuk pengurungan dan pengawasan budaya.*

Kata kunci: *Asia-Australia, homoseksual, migran, pengawasan, transformasi*

In most Asian cultures, sexuality is rarely openly discussed. Therefore, any discourse on sexuality in Asia is complex. The concept of sexuality and sexual expression in Asian culture is "a private matter" to the point that any direct discussion of this topic in public is unusual (Chan, 1995, p. 95). This attitude is so prevalent that it even affects how fictional narratives can be advertised.

To illustrate the point, the cover blurb of an Asian-Australian writer Lillian Ng's erotic tale *Swallowing Clouds* had to be

changed when it was published in Asia because of this sensitive issue. As Ng stated in an interview, "there is a law in South-East Asia banning erotica" (Yu, 2001, p. 113). Sexuality is understood to be a taboo topic so that, even in a book-marketing strategy, any promotion associated with sex is avoided. When Asians migrate to Western countries, such as Australia, they deal with a social construction of sexuality which is open, or more "liberal and free" (Ng, 2013).

Thus, as an Asian-Australian writer Hsu-Ming Teo states in an interview:

With regard to race, there's a considerable shifting of migrants, particularly middle-class ones, with regard to how they position themselves through ethnicity and later on through class and socio-economic mobility; that allows them to get through the gates to where they want to be (Broinowski, 2009).

In their encounter with Western culture, migrants may need to “position themselves through ethnicity” in order to adjust to “get[ting] through the gates”, that is, to the new culture. In light of this, Asian migrants' concept of sexuality is necessarily transformed in their encounters with Western culture.

This article examines Hsu-Ming Teo's second novel, *Behind the Moon* (2005) as she provides literary representations of the construction of sexuality in Asia and the transformation of this concept as experienced by an Asian migrant in Australia. Teo uses Sydney as a setting for their narratives and displays several aspects of the complexities of sexual identity-formation regarding their characters' particular backgrounds of cultural confinement.

This paper focuses on the cultural and social challenges facing the main character, Justin, in coming to terms with his homosexuality. Sydney's sexual geography affects Justin's sexual identity transformation and his own Singaporean family's practices of surveillance influence how he comes to terms with the double exclusion of his gay Asianness (Astuti, 2015, p. 82). A “theme of family history” is depicted in Teo's *Behind the Moon* (2005), which “centres on three teenagers from different backgrounds”

(Astuti, 2015, p. 75). This second novel was shortlisted in the 2006 New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards – Community Relations Commission Award. She has also published a book of literary criticism entitled *Desert Passions* (2012).

In taking this text as examples for analysis, I examine how the transformation of migrants' sexual identity is framed in Asian-Australian literature within the context of cross-cultural encounters in urban spaces. This paper argues that the contrasting cultural approaches — of strict control as opposed to greater freedom — within postcolonial cosmopolitanism, particularly in relation to sexual identities and sexual identity-formations, lead to an initial clash of cultures and ultimately either to mutual transformations or a reinforcement of lack of agency/sexual difference. Drawing on Robyn Morris's “politics of surveillance”, which encapsulates an idea “of ordering and categorising otherness”, this paper centres on the novel's exploration of a transforming cosmopolitan city and society which exercise surveillance of the main protagonists' own behaviour as well as that of others' (Morris, 2008b, p. 123). Focussing on concepts of cultural and sexual surveillance and metaphors of confinement, this research suggests that in her novel, Teo demonstrates the process of transforming sexual identities which negotiate restrictive Asian and — seemingly free — Australian attitudes towards sexuality.

METHOD

In order to investigate how an Asian-Australian novel addresses the representation

of transformation of a migrant's sexuality, this paper explores Teo's novel *Behind the Moon* in which tells of three Asian-Australian teenage migrants who share the experience of being outsiders in urban Sydney. The novel is analysed in terms of the sexual identity transformation of a young Australian-born gay, Justin, with Singaporean heritage, and whose sexual identity is pretty complicated (Astuti, 2015, p. 76).

Hsu-Ming Teo is a Malaysian-born writer who has written two novels: *Love and Vertigo* (2000) and *Behind the Moon* (2005). She moved to Australia when she was 7 years old in 1977. Now she resides in Sydney as a novelist and an academic historian at Macquarie University. Her Asian and Australian background is a significant rationale to include her interviews on her challenging experiences with Asian cultural heritage and Australian cultural education and nationality. These interviews are useful for the analysis for they also contain discussions on her novel.

This paper begins with an analysis of *Behind the Moon*, focusing on the cultural and social challenges facing the main character, Justin, in coming to terms with his homosexuality. The analysis examines how Sydney's sexual geography affects Justin's sexual identity transformation and how his own family's practices of surveillance influence how he comes to terms with the double exclusion of his gay Asianness. The contrast between attitudes in Asian and Australian cultures towards stereotypes of (Asian) sexuality is narrativised through metaphors of surveillance and confinement.

FINDINGS

Behind the Moon is a novel about conforming to cultural and sexual norms. As Madsen (2009, p. 17) states, she categorises Hsu-Ming Teo's second novel as Chinese writing which centres on national fear and racial loathing in "unAustralia". In this novel, Teo depicts young migrants' experiences in Australia, which in some way may reflect her own experiences of migrating to Australia from Malaysia when she was seven. This novel is a story of three school 'misfits': Justin 'Jay-Jay' Cheong, Tien Ho and Nigel 'Gibbo' Gibson. Told in the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator, the narrative demonstrates that "[t]he trauma of shared humiliation was as good a basis for friendship as any at that age" since they are all social rejects (Teo, 2005, p. 8).

Tien is a dark-skinned girl with Vietnamese and African-American heritage, who is separated from her mother when she is a child; Justin is an Australian-born Chinese boy with Singaporean heritage, who later comes out as gay; and Gibbo is an Australian boy plagued with "physical and social inaptitude" (Teo, 2005, p. 27). Becoming adolescents in Australia, these children experience the pressure to be "normal, everyday Australian[s]" as Tien struggles with her double-non-white-ethnic identity; Justin with his Asian homosexuality; and Gibbo with his lack of sporting skills (Teo, 2005, p. 33). Tien, for example, finds that her mixed-blood background fails to provide "a basis for belonging" (Teo, 2005, p. 128) in Australian culture. Apart from

her dark appearance, the failure to belong is particularly attributed to the absence of her Vietnamese mother and African-American father during the important years of her teenage life.

Behind the Moon presents the complexities of friendships between these migrant teenagers with multi-ethnic backgrounds. These friendships, between the teenagers and their families, enable Teo to address her idea that gated communities, as represented by Asian and Australian cultures, provide these young characters with a limited space to negotiate their identities across ethnicities. In the interview excerpt at the start of this chapter, Teo uses the notion of passing through a gate, into a “gated community”, in a metaphorical way. Gated communities are commonly understood as physical private areas with strictly controlled access restricted to residents and their guests, surrounded by a closed perimeter of high walls and fences. Teo remarks that the walls may refer to identity boundaries of similar cultures which “form safe communities and communities of the like-minded” (Broinowski, 2009, p. 195). As Teo has argued, the gate is not completely sealed off as there is access for the insiders and outsiders to get through the cultural boundaries and an opportunity for the two groups to have contact and exchanges with each other.

DISCUSSION

Teo’s idea of a wall or gated community can be productively related to Morris’s “politics of surveillance” to metaphorise how a community may exercise power in

the act of observing and classifying. This performative surveillance constructs “the observer as subject and the observed as object” so that the latter is transformed into “a thing and subjected to the power implied in the observer’s gaze” (Twigg, 1992, p. 308). In Teo’s *Behind the Moon*, the operations of borders and surveillance are constructed within diasporic Asian culture — brought about by first generation migrants — and also by Australian society. In this way, because of his Asian-Australian background, Justin’s sense of identity is patrolled “through both an external and internal surveillance of the self” (Morris, 2008b, p. 149). Teo uses metaphors of confinement and exclusion throughout the novel to demonstrate how Justin is excluded from both his Asian cultural heritage, because of his sexuality, and from acceptance by Australian society, because of his Asian appearance. He is thus doubly excluded from the ‘Aussie male’ stereotype by his sexuality and ethnicity.

As the title of Teo’s novel, *Behind the Moon*, is taken from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, it implies an idea of an idealised, but strange or foreign, place. Teo uses the lines from the film, in which the character Dorothy tells her dog Toto about her dream place where she can live without her callous relatives:

Some place where there isn’t any trouble,’ she said. ‘Do you suppose there is such a place, Toto? There must be. It’s not a place you can get to by a boat or a train. It’s far, far away. Behind the moon. Beyond the rain. Somewhere over the rainbow (Teo, 2005, p. 24).

The place ‘behind the moon’ serves as a metaphor for a dark, unknown, and

hidden place relating to Justin's search for belonging in terms of his sexual identity. As an Asian gay, Justin dreams of an idealised place where his homosexuality is accepted both by his Singaporean parents and by the Australian gay community. This place is unknown, metaphorically 'behind the moon', as he is confined both within the customs of Singaporean culture, which despises homosexuals, and within Australian society, which is often discriminatory against Asians. This double marginalisation is a burden for Justin: "He did not want to be Asian and he did not want to be gay" (Teo, 2005, p. 88). Thus, he dreams of a place where he is free from "any trouble", and from being condemned, hurt and excluded.

Justin's "Normality"

Teo complicates the idea of the possibility of "normality" for Justin as he struggles to conform to stereotypes in terms of both a national and a sexual identity. As he hides his homosexuality from his family and friends, he feels forced to act in a way that is considered 'normal', such as his attempt to be sexually attracted to Tien at the Year 12 formal. He goes to the party with Tien in an effort to maintain the appearance of normality. He ruins Tien's plan to "lose her virginity" with him after the party as he is unable to act as a 'normal' young man is expected to (Teo, 2005, p. 74). Teo emphasises Justin's confusion by suggesting that "he didn't know what normality was" (Teo, 2005, p. 141). The idea of 'normality' is constructed as conformity to society's expectations and stereotypes, whereas

Justin suffers from a confused identity: "He wanted to be himself, but he didn't know who he was either" (Teo, 2005, p. 141). His identity marks him with "symptoms of abnormality" both sexually and ethnically (Morris, 2006, p. 160). Justin is aware that the realisation of his sexuality should have been liberating for him but, because of his Asianness, it happens otherwise:

Being gay was a complicated affair. Gayness was an identity and, if you got it right, it was a means of belonging. If you didn't, if you were an Asian gay, it was practically an oxymoron (Teo, 2005, p. 141).

These sentences mark Justin's awareness of the critical ambivalence of his own identity. Through Justin's narrative, Teo demonstrates that the place of acceptance seems always out of reach, "far, far away" in his struggle for "normality".

In the depiction of Justin's parents, Teo presents a stereotypical first generation of Asian migrants. Although holding Australian citizenship, Justin's father and mother, Tek and Annabelle Cheong, with their Chinese-Singaporean background, continue to retain Asian traditions while also trying to assimilate with Australian culture. When Justin is expelled from a private school for "mysterious reasons", Tek feels unable to defend him or to protest the decision because of his Singaporean upbringing "by birth and education" (Teo, 2005, p. 11). Since, in Asian culture, conformity to social and family norms is important, Tek's family avoids any conduct that might bring shame to the family. Thus, Tek avoids "[drawing] attention to himself" by not protesting against the school's

obscure reason for Justin's "dropping out" (Teo, 2005, p. 11). In contrast, when Justin attaches posters of Mel Gibson and Mark Lee from the film *Gallipoli* on his bedroom wall, Tek expresses his approval. He believes that it is a positive sign that "Justin was growing up an Australian", unaware that the posters are part of Justin's gay infatuation with the movie stars (Teo, 2005, p. 6). Here, Teo shows that Tek continues to identify himself as a Singaporean but, on the other hand, he expects his son to become an Australian. Teo demonstrates the level of surveillance which operates within Singaporean culture through her representation of Justin's parents. They exercise control over Justin through their conservative Singaporean attitudes, particularly with regard to his sexual identity formation. On the other hand, Justin's parents are also being policed by Australian society in their avoidance of bringing shame to the family because of any perception of wrong conduct.

Annabelle's Singaporean Obsession

The novel is set between the 1980s and the 1990s, in the time of the changing values of Singapore's identity politics. According to Ortmann (2009), before the 1980s, the Singaporean government focused on the economic development. When "the widespread materialism within the society" became a concern, starting in the 1990s, the government promoted "so-called Asian values" to provide a new basis for the city-state's "stronger national identity" (Ortmann, 2009, p. 23). However, Ortmann's finding shows that

most Singaporeans demand the opportunity of "the negotiation of their Singaporean identity" that leads to the unstable and unsustainable construction of the national identity (Ortmann, 2009, p. 23). Liu (2014, p. 1225) adds that the new Chinese immigrants (the 2010s) help shape the Singaporeans' view of the new diaspora that "prioritize the nation above the ethnicity". Thus, these arguments provide the contexts that Annabelle still keeps her old-dated views of Singaporean values when she moves to Australia.

Teo's fiction contends that Annabelle's double (Asian-Australian) surveillance is symbolically represented in the way Annabelle, Justin's mother, teaches him toilet etiquette. Annabelle's ideas of public and private acts reflect aspects of Singapore's collectivist society in her constant attempts to conform to social norms and the need to control individual behaviour in public spaces. Like her husband, Tek, Annabelle believes that it would be embarrassing to attract attention from people in public. Her attitudes to toilet training can be seen as symbolic of teaching Justin the culture of her "motherland" rather than those of Australia (Madsen, 2009, p. 181).

During Justin's childhood, Annabelle teaches him how to use public toilets 'properly' in ways that conform to the idea of not bringing shame to the family; that is, leaving the toilet clean auditorily and visually. Thus, when Justin's mother made him stand on the rim of the toilet, "[s]he flushed the toilet once so that no-one would hear the happy tinkle of his urine hitting

water” (Teo, 2005, p. 2). She considers this activity as a private matter that should be left unheard by others. As she tells Justin, “Aim properly and don’t make a mess for other people to clean up” (Teo, 2005, p. 2).

Annabelle and Tek are always concerned with what society thinks of them, as indicated in Annabelle’s apprehension: “She could not endure the shame of strangers thinking she had fouled the toilet. She and her husband Tek lived their lives to one mantra: what would people say?” (Teo, 2005, p. 2). Getting approval in public or from society is their main concern; otherwise, they would breach the social norms and this would be shameful for them. This double surveillance is constructed from the Singaporean cultural concept of ‘losing face’ and from their belief that, as migrants, they are constantly being policed by Australian public society.

The toilet training regime also symbolises the complexities of Singaporean cultural encounters with Australian culture. Despite Australia being Justin’s birthplace, Annabelle’s obsession with cleanliness, a result of her Singaporean upbringing, continues to impose on his engagement with Australian culture. This is obvious in her instructions to him to transform “a western flush toilet into an eastern squat toilet” (Madsen, 2009, p. 182). Annabelle warns Justin when he enters the public toilet without her, “Jay-Jay. Don’t touch anything you don’t have to, you hear me? And don’t sit on the toilet seat! ... You crouch, okay? ... You listen to Mummy like a good boy.” (Teo, 2005, p. 3). It is apparent that Teo

portrays Annabelle as rejecting assimilation by using the toilet in her own way. For his parents, Justin becomes “a good boy” if he is “obedient” to his parents’ rules (Teo, 2005, p. 3).

The depiction of toilets may also be read as addressing the “fear of contamination” by another culture (Madsen, 2009, p. 182). Apart from reminding Justin of Singapore’s policies on cleanliness and hygiene, Annabelle also teaches him fear of contamination from previous users. As he finishes urinating, his mother “tore off a couple of sheets of toilet paper and threw them down the loo” before taking more sheets to dry him (Teo, 2005, p. 2). Annabelle’s obsession with cleanliness in toilets serves as a metaphor for teaching Singaporean ‘hygienic’ culture to Justin as well as her fear of infection as she comments, “Who knew what had contaminated them?” (Teo, 2005, p. 2). This cultural fear resulting from the use of the public toilet symbolises the fear of being contaminated by other ‘public or global’ cultures and of losing the old culture in their encounter with the new culture. Annabelle’s fear addresses her concern for cultural purification and protecting her own culture from that of the new one.

These toilet encounters also indicate that Justin’s parents’ perception of sexuality remains “Asian”: private, taboo and conforming to social (family) norms. With his parents’ ambivalent attitudes, and their determination to keep Asian traditions while living in Australian urban society, Justin tries to find his own way of defining

his sexual identity. These intimate yet public spaces represent a metaphor of dirtiness on two levels, cultural and sexual. The toilet in Strathfield Plaza is the place of Justin's first gay sexual encounter. Ironically, as he is engaged in this sexual activity at the same time as a multiple shooting occurs in the shopping centre (which is discussed in more detail later), he survives the shooting. For Justin, "survival [brings] its own guilt" in the two ways: his first forbidden gay sexual experience (Teo, 2005, p. 21) and his own lucky survival.

The fear of contamination in terms of sexuality is reiterated in the depiction of Annabelle's censoring of Justin's television watching. She considers that an exposure to 'adult themes' could contaminate Justin's sexual purity. When there is a sex scene on television, she covers his eyes with her hand and says, "Dirty things going on" (Teo, 2005, p. 7). The television snippet of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras emphasises Justin's parents' opinions of homosexuality, as his mother screams in horror, "*Ai-yoh*, look at all those *hum sup lohs!*", and chases Justin away from the television (Teo, 2005, p. 7). It is significant that she uses a Cantonese term here, one that is unglossed in the text, as it expresses her deeply-held traditional cultural values. His father adds to this censorship of 'adult themes' as he comments, "They shouldn't show it on prime time television when children might be watching" (Teo, 2005, p. 7). With this restrictive sexual upbringing, Justin develops an understanding that talking about sexuality is forbidden

because it is a "dirty" issue for his family. Thus, when he becomes aware of his own sexuality, he suffers from "regrets" for his own identity as it is in opposition to these conservative norms and is considered "unclean" by his family and friends (Teo, 2005, p. 8). Justin's conservative parents manipulate the way he sees himself and his sexual identity, playing on his feelings of guilt and contamination so that he is even more confused about his sexuality.

Sydney as a Site of Sexual Identity

Teo deploys sexuality as a crucial mechanism in exploring Australianness which is constructed within the confines of normality and masculinist stereotypes. Justin's narrative in *Behind the Moon* addresses the idea that Asian gay identity continues to be peripheral in a masculinist Australian national identity, even in the cosmopolitan city of Sydney.

Teo's subversive use of depictions of Australian masculinities in film is associated with Justin's recognition of his gay identity and attraction to homoeroticism. Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli* is deployed for its display of war representing Australian masculine stereotypes of mateship and sacrifice. Watching this film at the age of twelve, Justin is "mesmerised" at the sight of the actors' male bodies, at which point he discovers his own homosexuality (Teo, 2005, p. 6). His focus is not on how ANZAC soldiers represent Australian nationhood, as expected when he watches the film in a history class. Teo denotes Justin's homoeroticism in the way that Justin stares at the scenes of the soldiers

“swimming naked” and “those lithe white male bodies rippling in the sea” (Teo, 2005, p. 5-6). Teo emphasises Justin’s longing to be submerged in Australian culture, as shown by the film’s characters that represent young Australian manhood, Archy, a young bushman from the outback and Frank, a larrikin from the city. Subversively, Teo also offers a different interpretation of the Australian myth of mateship, shown in the film, in the form of Justin’s response — his fantasy of having a male partner.

By depicting Sydney as the site of Justin’s coming to terms with his gay identity, Teo’s novel colludes with a popular conception that Sydney is “a gay mecca”, typified by the annual Mardi Gras. The Mardi Gras signifies Justin’s parents’ difficult struggle against the fact that sexuality, particularly homosexuality, is part of Sydney society, and especially later, as part of their son’s life. In this sense, Sydney serves as a gateway for Justin to learn “the accoutrements” of how to be an Australian gay (Teo, 2005, p. 141). However, in Teo’s subversive narrative, Sydney is a site of some ambivalence in this regard, an index of Justin’s social and cultural difficulties in entering his new sexual identity.

Teo uses two incidents in the narrative that use the metaphor of exposure relating to Justin’s ‘coming out’. Teo’s refers to specific historical events in the narrative to address transformative moments in Justin’s sexual identity. As a historian, Teo has deliberate reasons for deploying history, one of which is “to look at the way history affects ordinary people” (Broinowski,

2009, p. 194). Teo uses a local event in Strathfield, an inner suburb in Sydney — the 1991 shooting at Strathfield Plaza — and an international event — Princess Diana’s 1997 funeral — to convey the idea of collective moments that may also affect individual lives. The Strathfield shooting takes place in the café where the three best friends, Tien, Justin and Gibbo, are supposed to meet for their lunch. Further, in the chapter entitled “Dead Diana Dinner”, Teo uses the dinner as a collective moment of shared mourning and fear of loss, both for Princess Diana’s death and for the friends’ impending separation. Both events, the shooting and Diana’s funeral procession, relate to the process of Justin’s embracing his homosexuality. During the shooting, Justin experiences his first sexual encounter in the public toilet at the Plaza, as previously discussed, while during “the Diana dinner”, Justin’s homosexuality is incidentally revealed to his family and friends.

Teo’s subversive use of the city is explored in the novel’s representation of Strathfield, which is an exemplary site of normality in a cosmopolitan space. While on the surface Strathfield seems like a ‘normal’ suburb, the shooting reveals a violent underside to its façade. Strathfield is portrayed as an uneventful and “staid” place with a multicultural society, incorporating Anglo and Eastern European houses, Indian spice shops, Chinese restaurants and Korean “cute shops” and karaoke clubs (Teo, 2005, p. 15). The suburb’s multicultural school children are described as having amiable

manners rather than as the stereotypical Australian “fearsome crowd” of teenagers (Teo, 2005, p. 16):

They did not menace the middle-aged with the sight of basketball boots, baseball caps twisted backwards and baggy tracksuit tops over school trousers. Nor did the girls offend the intolerant with the Muslim modesty of elegantly arranged headscarves.

The description of the children’s clothing is representative of an orderly society. The cosmopolitanism of the city is not only marked by the culturally diverse buildings but also identified by the inhabitants’ tolerance to religious practices. This seeming ‘normality’ in a multicultural suburb is subverted by the shooting, during which, at the same time, Justin subverts the ‘normality’ of his sexuality. Exposure is therefore a strong theme underlying this incident in the narrative.

The narrative demonstrates that beneath the calmness and orderliness of the suburb are hidden problematic issues. Teo re-enacts in exact details the real event of the 1991 Strathfield massacre, “one of Australia’s worst and most violent crimes”, in which a gunman went on a shooting rampage and, before being caught by the police, committed suicide (Jones, 2011, p. 1). The man was suspected of suffering from depression because of family and financial difficulties. In the novel, the advertisement above the train station platform, which says: “If you’ve got time to kill, relax at Strathfield Plaza”, becomes unintentionally ironic as the gunman starts shooting people randomly at the Coffee Pot café inside the Plaza (Teo, 2005, p. 16). In this respect, Teo indicates that behind the

exterior of a calm multicultural suburb, there are hidden tensions. The incident also evokes Justin’s anxiety about his sexual orientation and conveys the idea that he is not what he seems.

‘Normality’ is also depicted in Justin’s effort to fit in and to be ‘like a real Australian’. Like the suburb of Strathfield, he is also described as having a multicultural background as he was born as an ABC, an “Australian-born Chinese” (Teo, 2005, p. 13). He represents a group of Asian-Australians, a generation called a banana, “yellow on the outside, white on the inside” (Khoo, 2003, p. 1). In his childhood, he is ashamed of his mother’s calling out to him in a public space to ask whether he wants to urinate, “to shee-shee” (Teo, 2005, p. 1). Justin has already learned to adopt an attitude like a “non-Asian” by “censoring his mother in his head; eavesdropping on their conversation from an imaginary non-Asian point of view and marking out her oddness” as if he is not part of his mother’s being different in Australia (Teo, 2005, p. 2). He plays in the school basketball, cricket and tennis teams like a real Australian boy with sports skills and a shelf of ribbons and trophies, but he is only considered as a “B-grade” player because of his Asianness which never makes him a complete Australian (Teo, 2005, p. 12). However, he does not dare to “menace” nor “offend” Singaporean culture, demonstrating his ‘normal’ character as a good Singaporean boy who is obedient to his parents’ rules. Gibbo and Tien find him able to “take a joke”, having an “easygoing

smile” and a “good natured” personality, which hides his confusion about his sexual orientation (Teo, 2005, p. 12, 13, 14). For them, Justin is a “*nice*” friend to be with (Teo, 2005, p. 13, original emphasis). Thus, Teo portrays Justin as a “good” and “nice” Asian-Australian boy who covers up the complications of his sexual identity.

Justin’s struggle with his sexuality suggests that being an Asian gay is not culturally acceptable, as he believes that, as a “first-generation Singaporean Australian in the western suburbs of Sydney”, he has to learn about gay society by himself (Teo, 2005, p. 141). His Asianness generates his caution in entering this new society or sub-culture, the gay scene:

He assumed that he would have to gravitate to Oxford Street or the Cross to explore his gayness, but he didn’t feel confident enough to do it. A couple of times he’d ventured timidly to cafés in Darlinghurst and sat outside, slowly stirring his cappuccino, keeping an eye out for overtly gay men so that he could see what he was supposed to look and act like. All he knew was that he didn’t look right because he was Asian. He did not have the right clothes or hair or the right body type. [...] On top of being Asian, he wore the wrong clothes, had the wrong hairstyle and was altogether too much of a westie (Teo, 2005, p. 141-142).

Justin’s observation of the city not only shows racial exclusion but also class discrimination. This description demonstrates the way Justin constructs his own idea of a gay identity and how he identifies himself in that construction. Apart from being racially

different, he recognises that his clothing and appearance will always mark him as being from the wrong place. He is not even acceptable as a ‘normal’ gay.

By mentioning names of places and streets, Teo highlights the sexual geography of Sydney. By focussing on Justin’s feelings, she also underlines the exclusionary atmosphere of the city for Asian gay men. Other Asian gay men, like him, are less likely to be open for exactly the same reasons he has. Oxford Street, the Cross and Darlinghurst are representative places of a gay community where Justin feels uncertain of the welcome he might receive. Despite the places being described as public spaces, in words such as “street” and “cafés”, they address a sense of exclusion for strangers, like Justin. This is captured in Teo’s description of Justin challenging himself to be there. He particularly prevents himself from attracting attention, as illustrated in the word “timidly”. His choice of sitting “outside” also shows his fear of entering the ‘inside’ of the community. The more he observes, the more he feels the sense of unbelonging as he calls himself a “B-grade gay” (Teo, 2005, p. 142). Apart from his ignorance of gay fashions and his ‘incorrect’ body type, his Asianness is the most significant feature which excludes him from this group of Australian gay men.

Yet the narrative suggests that it is in realising his gay identity that Justin is able, too, to realise his Australian identity. Justin’s ambivalent feeling about his Asian-Australian identity is illustrated when he finally finds “a subterranean intervarsity Asian gay club”,

which shows that Asian gays are not public, unlike Anglo gays (Teo, 2005, p. 142). The “subterranean” place is significantly positioned below the surface of the city. As the club consists of foreign students, he becomes aware of his Australianness. He develops his “feeling of superiority” to them, as he is not a part of the temporary Australian resident culture like them (Teo, 2005, p. 142). The problems of being different manifest in his ‘un’-belonging again.

Although he finally builds a close relationship with a Malaysian student, Jordie Kok, it only lasts less than a year as Jodie is a reminder of Asian cultural attitudes towards gayness. In Australia, their relationship is hidden from Jordie’s Malaysian flatmates and Justin’s parents. Justin’s short visit to Malaysia reveals Jordie’s view of their relationship: as a conservative Buddhist, he chooses to become a “filial son” to his parents by preserving his virginity until marriage (Teo, 2005, p. 145). This visit emphasises Justin’s newfound Australianness as he is criticised by Jordie’s father as being “Aussified” and as becoming “westernised Chinese” by Jordie, which in turn makes him angry that “this Malaysian man had the gall to criticise an Australian” (Teo, 2005, p. 147-148). Teo highlights Justin’s decision to relinquish his desire for “traditional Asian roots via Malaysian students” (Teo, 2005, p. 328). In this sense, his gay identity helps to formulate his Australianness. Justin’s failed relationship with Jordie and the homophobic attitude of his extended family in Singapore encourage him to “despise

Asianness” and to move forward into “an empowering white multiculturalism” (Teo, 2005, p. 327-328). Teo portrays Justin as transforming into becoming part of an Australian gay community through the new strategies he undertakes in the city of Sydney in order to find white gay men who are attracted to Asians (Teo, 2005, p. 153).

Justin’s Sexual Identity Transformation

The identity politics in Australia has been understood as a masculinised nation, in a way that the idea of mateship has shaped how Australia has been constructed. Simmonds, Rees, and Clark (2017, p. 8) contend that in a transnational analysis in the context of Australia, “place is imagined and inscribed locally as well as utilised as a transnational concept”. Boucher and Reynolds (2017, p. 152) supports this idea through his research on the history of migration in Australia, “the sexual cultures have been shaped by different national contexts”. The political identity has remade “the relationship between the nation-state and its citizens” (Boucher & Reynolds, 2017, p. 151). As mateship is part of Australian national identities, there has been an argumentative concept “which mateship could easily become eroticised and sexualised” – a point made in many a Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras float (Boucher & Reynolds, 2017, p. 153). Since in late twentieth-century Australia, Sydney, along with Melbourne, have been “crucial sites of contact” with developments of historical dynamism of ideas about homosexual life and identity in Australia (Boucher & Reynolds, 2017, p. 155-156). In his geographic research on queer Asian men in Sydney in the 2010s,

Ruez (2016, p. 4) argues that the particular experiences of queer migrants in Sydney are “racialized and inflected with hegemonic masculinities”. Sydney is proven to provide “a complicated geography of welcoming and unwelcoming spaces” (Ruez, 2016, p. 9). The complications are shown in the ideas of Sydney, to the centres and margins of queer urban life, as “sites of exclusion or violence”; or, seen as “comfortable or pleasurable sites, yet as places to avoid”; along with “the mobile and shifting urban geographies of queer life in Sydney more broadly” (Ruez, 2016, p. 9). The viability of a “politics of visibility” seeking to reassert a masculine Asian identity within the confines of valorising national identity politics (Ruez, 2016, p. 11). Thus, the idea of Australia’s notion of sexuality is a broader one, as Ruez concludes, “incorporating both sex itself and its politics at the intersection of gender, race, and class” (Ruez, 2016, p. 13).

In Teo’s representation, Sydney is described as a populated and multicultural city, and Teo presents Justin’s way of entering the gay community as operating in the “anonymity” of large cities. As in Strathfield his friends and family might recognise him, he turns to the inner-city suburb of Darlinghurst. He abandons open spaces, like streets and cafés, and searches for shadowy places, such as nightclubs in order to obscure his Asianness. As he recounts, “In the pulsing press of anonymous bodies gyrating in a nightclub he could pretend that he actually belonged to this community” (Teo, 2005, p. 149). The crowdedness and the dimness of the nightclub make him unidentifiable.

Here, Teo suggests that for Justin, being unidentified means belonging, being part of the community.

Justin’s coming to terms with his sexuality enables him to reveal his hidden sexual identity. His attempts to be part of an Australian gay community are illustrated metaphorically in the transformation of his appearance. The “silk shirts” which he wears during his relationship with Jordie are now replaced by Australian and European brands, “tight white Bonds T-shirts and Armani jeans” (Teo, 2005, p. 149). The silk shirts represent Justin’s encounters with Asian cultures, specifically Singaporean and Malaysian, which are restrictive of his sexual identity. The tight T-shirts which expose the “satisfactory contours” of his “gym-fit swimmer’s body” that has resulted from his fourteen-month hard training are symbolic of the exposure of his self-acceptance of his sexuality (Teo, 2005, p. 150). He adopts a new hairstyle that he believes as a typical of a gay hair-cut, “short”, and even plans “to shave his head” (Teo, 2005, p. 150). He changes himself to become a “Europhile”, dying “his hair blond” and cooking perfect pasta (Teo, 2005, p. 324). He has his skin “artificially tanned” transforming his skin colour to “a beautiful golden brown” (Teo, 2005, p. 150). This skin choice is a revelation of his understanding that he is able to use his “exotic oriental ... dark looks” to attract white gay men (Teo, 2005, p. 158). Thus, Teo delineates Justin’s Asian-Australian transformation as he wears Western fashions and embraces a Western lifestyle but continues to maintain his exotic Asianness.

However, Teo has incorporated, throughout the narrative, examples of underlying racism and discrimination that Justin faces as a result of his ethnicity and his sexuality, problematising this sense of new belonging. The depiction early in the narrative of an incident on a tram, when Justin is the target of verbal racial abuse by a drunken man, exposes Justin's ethnicity as constantly under surveillance by the white gaze. Teo's figuration of the drunken man in the tram is significant because he functions as a representation of urban Australian society. The man insults Justin by using a litany of derogatory words for people of Asian descent, calling him "chink", "slope", "slanty-eyed boatie", "fish-breath gook", and telling him: "We don't want youse here. Go back to where you came from, you commie bastard boatie" (Teo, 2005, p. 64). The man's string of insults and his demand that Justin goes "back" to where he "came from" illustrates the gate-keeping mentality often encountered by migrants in their engagement with the host culture.

This incident demonstrates that Justin's Chinese appearance continues to make him a target of racist abuse and that, to the drunken racist, all Asians are indistinguishable, conflating Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean people, in an ignorant attack on all Asian people. Though Justin was born in Australia, he retains the mark of his ethnic identity as 'Other' in his own birthplace. This incident portrays the conditional hospitality and policing of borders that is exercised by ordinary people, not just the authorities, wherein

anyone who is not judged as belonging is stereotyped as a "commie bastard boatie". The reaction of other tram passengers indicates "covert racism" in their refusal to notice or react to this overt display of racial abuse. As they are "looking out the window or just looking away" (Teo, 2005, p. 64), their responses demonstrate urban Australians' passive attitudes towards this obvious racism in a city known for its cosmopolitanism, Sydney. They are either reluctant to be identified with Justin, or afraid of being involved in the conflict between the racial majority, the drunken Australian man, and the racial minority, the Asian-looking Justin.

Justin continues to be pursued by this double marginalisation and discrimination, as Teo shows the verbal racial abuse escalating to become physical abuse towards the end of the novel. Taking a lonely walk on the beach after the revelation of his sexuality to his family and friends, and after breaking up with his boyfriend Dirk, Justin is bashed into a coma by "three bullish men" due to his Asian gayness (Teo, 2005, p. 333). These abusers are described as drunk with "the stale stench of beer on their breath", similar to the abuser on the tram (Teo, 2005, p. 333). The deployment of drunken men abusing Justin is significant as they are representative of those who may lose control and express their deepest thoughts that may be otherwise "censored" in a multicultural society. Thus, the drunken men expose hidden judgements, fears and prejudices, as indicated in their violent verbal exchanges with Justin. While

bashing him, they keep asking him the question, “What are you?” (Teo, 2005, p. 333) to which they demand the response they have already given him, “fucking Asian faggot”. The men’s policing of “normality” serves as a means of controlling and surveilling Australian masculine identity. They attempt to enforce a stereotypical doubly marginalised identity onto Justin — a positionality that Justin refuses to be confined to, even though this results in his being left in a coma. He refuses to repeat the words that would have saved him from further beating, words that merely reinforce this exclusion, “fucking Asian faggot”.

Ironically, the bashing releases Justin from his own attachments to his confining cultural and sexual identities, and even encourages in him an assertion of agency. Teo highlights the irony of the incident as, during the beating, Justin is liberated from this marked identity in an assertion of his individuality, when he replies, instead of the men’s imposed phrase, the words, “I am me” (Teo, 2005, p. 333). He is aware of the liberation, as he recounts: “He no longer needed the external markers of identity, the first thing people saw or learned about him and judged him by. He was not reducible to his ethnicity or his sexuality or his occupation or geographical location or even to his family” (Teo, 2005, p. 334). In light of this, Justin emancipates himself from his own cultural and sexual confinement based on the outward markers of both his ethnic and sexual identity.

Yet another irony ensues from this violent incident, as Justin’s comatose body

changes the perceptions of his family and friends about his sexuality. His coma reunites them, so that they even welcome the hospital visits of Justin’s ex-boyfriend, Dirk. As the bashing happens after the revelation of his sexuality, his coma enables his family and friends to show their acceptance of his homosexuality. For example, Gibbo, who has maintained distance in their friendship after being passionately kissed by Justin during a camping trip after their high school exams and reacting violently to it, comes to understand Justin’s suffering. Visiting Justin at the hospital, Gibbo regrets his “explosion of fists” at that time (Teo, 2005, p. 92). He only wishes “he’d had the maturity, the compassion and courage to kiss Justin back, hug him tightly, [and] then ease away” (Teo, 2005, p. 337). Thus, Justin’s coma marks a transformative moment for everyone in terms of collective moments of shared love, understanding and mourning for Justin. Thus Teo portrays Sydney not only as having reputation for being a gay-tolerant city that hosts the Mardi Gras but also as having its dark side in its attitudes towards Asian gay men.

CONCLUSION

This paper’s analysis of Teo’s fiction shows how Asian sexuality is represented in the contexts of cultural surveillance and confinement in an Australian city. Asian cultures are depicted as imposing strict control over sexuality, a control that is either loosened or maintained in the new culture. The city, in this case, Sydney, becomes a metaphor for the assertion of transformed

sexual identities. In this way, Justin has the courage to assert his individual sexual and cultural identity despite the pressure from both his inherited Singaporean culture and the new “host” culture.

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